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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PANTHEISM-CONTROVERSY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEGEL'S THOUGHT

Without a doubt, one of the disputes that caused the most commotion at the end of the 18th century was that between Jacobi and Mendelssohn, and it had to do with what is commonly known as the pantheism-controversy. According to Goethe, Jacobi's *Spinoza-Letters* were the immediate cause of this dispute: »[They] had the effect of an explosion revealing and expressing the most intimate relations between respectable men – relations of which those involved were not even aware, completely hidden in a society otherwise so enlightened.«[1]

The intention behind Jacobi's *Spinoza-Letters* was to attack the rationalism and idealism of the Enlightenment. Putting aside the issue of whether Jacobi's interpretation of Spinoza is correct, Jacobi disputed one of the basic assumptions of the Enlightenment, namely that reason has the capacity to know life itself, reality in its immediacy and, ultimately, the absolute. If reason fully accepts the consequences of its own reasonings, doesn't reason inevitably lead to atheism, fatalism and, finally, to nihilism? And if this suspicion proves to be true, do we still have to remain loyal to this reason? These were the pertinent questions that Jacobi posed against the philosophy of the Enlightenment.[2] Everyone involved immediately realized the crucial importance of these questions – especially Hegel. During his student days at the *Tübinger Stift*, Hegel read the *Spinoza-Letters* and discussed them with his friends.[3] Indeed, his early unpublished manuscripts reveal the effects of Jacobi's influence. Later on, after 1801, Hegel discusses Jacobi's writings explicitly. Several recent publications have demonstrated that Jacobi's philosophy was of vital importance not only to Hegel's thinking, but also to the development of German idealism as a whole.[4] Basically, Hegel agreed with Jacobi's criticism of the abstract character of the philosophy of the Enlightenment; but he simultaneously criticized (at least from the Jena period on) Jacobi's view that the absolute can only be present in man through an immediate revelation, inasmuch as this does not allow for any conceptual clarification.

In this essay, I will consider the question of whether reason is capable of knowing the absolute or God, and, if so, what kind of reason is being presupposed. For both Hegel and Jacobi, these questions are of fundamental importance. First, I will analyze Jacobi's view of man's capacity to understand God, as this is the central issue of the pantheism-controversy. Afterwards, I will discuss the diverging answers to this question that Hegel gives at the end of the Frankfurt period and the beginning of the Jena period. My primary aim is to point out how Jacobi's *Spinoza-Letters* strongly influenced Hegel's thinking, both positively and negatively. Beyond this, I wish to show that Hegel's transition from a religious to a philosophical approach with respect to the absolute does not necessarily constitute a break in the development of his thought. Rather, this transition can be interpreted as the natural result of his critical engagement with Jacobi's *Spinoza-Letters*, and ultimately, with the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Jacobi: The Separation of Thinking and Being

The following quotation well characterizes Jacobi's criticism of the rationalism of the Enlightenment: »Representations can never render the real *as such*. They contain characteristics of the real *things*, not the *real itself*. The real can be rendered as little apart from its immediate perception as can *consciousness apart from consciousness*, *life apart from life*.«[5] This passage outlines two basic principles of Jacobi's philosophy. First, there is a break between the representations of reason and the real. Second, a true perception, representation, knowledge etc. of something presupposes a strict analogy between the perceiving, representing, knowing person on one hand and what is being perceived, represented, known etc. on the other hand. In other words, thinking *about* something that is not, properly speaking, an object of thought, is altogether wrong. The philosophy of the Enlightenment violates these basic principles insofar as it maintains the pretension of knowing, or at least thinking, conceptually living reality and, ultimately, also God. However, rational concepts can never reach the living God. Such knowledge is violent to the extent that reason reduces the other (viz., being, life, God) to an object or a moment of itself, thereby annihilating the other as an (independent) reality. Jacobi is not so much opposed to reason itself as the qualification of his thought as a ›philosophy of faith‹ suggests; instead, he is opposed to the inappropriate use of reason to know reality itself.

In his *Spinoza-Letters*, and especially in the important seventh appendix, Jacobi discusses this problematic in more detail. Language and reason are the most important means for maintaining human life. When perception becomes more refined and the connection of the perceived more differentiated, the need for an abstract language arises: »In this way a world of reason arises in which signs and words take the place of substances and forces. We appropriate the universe by tearing it apart and by creating a *world of images, ideas and words* which is adapted to our capacities, but which does not have any resemblance to the real world. We understand completely what we create in this way, insofar as it is our creation; and we do not understand what cannot be created in this way. Our philosophical understanding does not reach beyond its own production. [...] *Perceiving, recognizing and understanding* constitute the complete content of our intellectual capacity.«[6] We see here that Jacobi conceives human reason as derivative of immediate, living existence; reason is crucial for the physical preservation of mankind, but not for man's spiritual existence. However, what is much more philosophically important is that reason is incapable of understanding reality, for the two are of a different order. Reason takes the place of real substances. It can only understand its own productions (ideas and words) and is unable to conceive reality as such. Thus, Jacobi introduces a break between thinking and reality. This is the essence of his criticism of Spinoza and also of the rest of modern philosophy. This is made even more clear when he reacts against Descartes' adage *cogito, ergo sum*, stating that the ›*sum*‹ should not be posited after the ›*cogito*‹ so as to suggest that the ›*sum*‹ could be deduced from the ›*cogito*‹. On the contrary, the immediate and unconditional character of being necessarily precedes the mediating activity of thinking. Jacobi himself sees this as his main difference of opinion with his philosophical contemporaries.[7] Thus, rational mediation does not imply an enrichment of immediately perceived reality, but instead an impoverishment. Formulated positively, this means that the object of reason coincides with the self-constructed world of concepts and ideas and is by no means reality as such. Reason connects its concepts according to the principle of identity, and they remain limited to what reason itself has constructed.[8] The entire conceptual world of reason can never reveal »a *real* beginning, a *real* principle of no matter what *objective* existence« to our understanding.[9]

The consequences of the incapacity of reason to know living existence become manifest when reason, in spite of its fundamental finitude, nevertheless tries to disclose immediate being. In attempting to understand the unconditional, reason undertakes something absurd, because it finds itself bound to an endless chain of conditional conditions and ideal constructions: »When everything that originates and is present has to be understandable, then it has to originate and be present in a conditional way; thus, as long as we understand, we are bound to a chain of *conditional conditions*. Where this chain ends, we also cease to understand, and that is also the end of the coherence which we call nature«.[10] There is a clear break implied between the conditional and the unconditional, the natural and the supernatural, and, ultimately, between thinking and being. Consequently, the construction of a rational concept of the unconditional or supernatural means formulating a condition of the unconditional. By operating in this way, reason reduces the supernatural to something natural, thereby violating its essence.

Up to this point, we have treated the nature and consequences of finite reason. Jacobi called such finite reason an instrumental use of reason. As we have seen, reason is a very useful instrument if confined to the sphere of the conditional. However, there is also another, non-instrumental reason: »There has to live still another spirit in man than the spirit of syllogism. I take this spirit to be the breath of God in the complex of the earth«.[11] This brings us to the heart of Jacobi's philosophy, namely a contemplation of the way in which the unconditional and immediate can be revealed to man: »In my judgment, the utmost achievement of a researcher is to unveil and reveal *existence*. [...] Explanation is for him a means, a way

to an end, the nearest – never the ultimate end. His ultimate end is what is unexplainable, the unsolvable, immediate, the elementary«.[12] Jacobi goes to great lengths to distinguish as clearly as possible both the (epistemological) consciousness and the (ontological) essence of the unconditional and immediate from the conditional and mediated. Having made this basic distinction, he asks how a transition from the infinite to the finite can be made.[13] From an ontological perspective, the unconditional lies outside nature and all natural coherence. But as the sum of the conditional, nature is at the same time present in the unconditional and connected with it, even as they can never be identical. In order to clarify this complex relationship, Jacobi calls the unconditional the supernatural, from which the natural can only originate in a supernatural way, that is, through divine creation.[14]

This ontological relation between the natural and the supernatural has its counterpart in man's consciousness: »His consciousness is a combination of two original representations, the representation of the *conditional* and of the *unconditional*. Both are inseparable from each other, but in such a way that the representation of the conditional presupposes the representation of the unconditional and can only be given *in the latter*«.[15] In line with Jacobi's basic principle of the analogy between consciousness itself and that of which it is conscious, it is evident that the unconditional cannot be represented by reason, but only in a consciousness that is as immediate as the unconditional itself. Jacobi refers to this consciousness with terms such as faith, feeling, presentiment and ›revelation‹.[16] This consciousness is the analogue of the supernatural in man's consciousness. Jacobi defines this consciousness as man's free activity in the execution of his will.[17] Only man's free will, being the expression of God's own will, is capable of restraining the syllogisms of reason.[18] This reveals a further analogy, namely between God's free creation, as the pre-eminent manifestation of the supernatural, and man's free will. As the word ›revelation‹ already indicates, revelation is an immediate certainty and by no means the result of a process of reasoning: »This certainty not only needs no principles at all, but simply excludes all principles. [...] Conviction based on grounds is only a second-hand certainty«.[19] It is unnecessary for man to strive for this certainty, since it is already *a priori* given to him as a fact.[20] Here, Jacobi opposes his own immediate realism to the idealism of the Enlightenment. It is clear that the consciousness of the unconditional is not only epistemologically incommensurable with reasonable knowledge, but also prior to conditional knowing. Jacobi remarks: »We are all born in faith and have to remain in faith«.[21]

In conclusion, one can say that Jacobi limits the instrumental use of reason to the sphere of the conditional, whereas the unconditional can only be grasped in the immediate consciousness of man's free will, the analogue of the supernatural in him. Thus, Jacobi remains faithful to his basic principle of the analogy between consciousness and that of which it is conscious. But with an eye to the philosophical status of Jacobi's immediate realism, a crucial question arises concerning the relation between man as a natural being and man as a supernatural being, between man's finite reason and his free will. Jacobi explicitly refuses all questions on this issue because they would lead to further questions about the possibility of a theory of creation and to setting conditions for the unconditional. For Jacobi, this would mean a relapse into an instrumental way of thinking.[22] However, it seems that Jacobi is implying that there is no relation whatsoever between the immediate consciousness of the unconditional and mediating knowledge. The transition from the conditional to the unconditional can only be made through a *salto mortale*. The result is that eventually the rational status of the immediate consciousness of the unconditional is jeopardized.

Hegel: The Necessary Mediation of the Immediate

Jacobi's attack on the philosophy of the Enlightenment in general together with his specific attack on the capacities of reason to know the absolute profoundly influenced the development of Hegel's thought. Although we have no direct proof of this in Hegel's *Jugendschriften*, several authors have pointed out the striking similarities between Jacobi's and Hegel's determinations of fundamental concepts such as religion and philosophy and their mutual relation. H.-J. Gawoll summarizes Jacobi's influence on Hegel as a »rehabilitation of immediacy«.[23] In order to illustrate this influence more clearly, I wish to refer to

Hegel's *Systemfragment*, in which he conceives religion and reason as (in)capable of thinking the absolute. For Hegel, religion is »the elevation of man from finite life to infinite life«.[24] Infinite life can be called spirit, a living unity of the manifold of individual living beings. Consequently, this spirit does not stand above all these individual lives, but is united with them and inspires them as living organs. By doing so, spirit makes of the whole a living unity of living beings. This elevation to infinite life, as well as infinite life or God himself, cannot be thought or contemplated because this infinite living unity does not contain conceptual determinations. It is here that Hegel's dependence on Jacobi becomes apparent: the absolute is immediately given in a non-reflective attitude of faith.

Hegel's dependence on Jacobi is even more striking in Hegel's analysis of the limited scope of reason. Hegel asks what happens if philosophy still tries to determine conceptually the relationship between unity and multiplicity in religion. In the living unity of religion, multiplicity is no longer present as such. It only exists as far as it is related to the living spirit, as a living organ of this spirit. But, when one begins to reflect on this, it appears that within this unity something is still being excluded, namely multiplicity insofar as it is not related to unity. »In other words, the process of reflective thinking produces time and again new propositions about life as a unity of union and non-union, and can continue with this indefinitely. [...] Every expression whatsoever is a product of reflection, and therefore it is possible to demonstrate in the case of every expression that, when reflection propounds it, another expression, not propounded, is excluded«.[25] Since this reflective process of posing and opposing, including and excluding can go on indefinitely without rest, the religious unity of life disappears more and more from sight. Therefore, Hegel argues that the elevation to infinite life is not the result of an act of thinking, but is instead the fruit of God's inspiration which is also at work in finite life: »What has been called a union of synthesis and antithesis is not something propounded by the understanding or by reflection, but has a character of its own, namely that of being a reality beyond all reflection.« »Philosophy therefore has to stop short of religion because it is a process of thought and, as such a process, implies an opposition with non-thought as well as an opposition between the thinking mind and the object of thought«.[26]

Notwithstanding these striking similarities concerning both the absolute as immediately given and the limited scope of reason, Hegel distances himself already in the *Systemfragment* from Jacobi. This distance concerns Jacobi's incapacity either to think at an ontological level the transition from the unconditional, or supernatural, to the conditional, or natural, or to think at an epistemological level the transition from the immediate consciousness of man's free will (the analogue of the supernatural in man) to rational mediation. For Jacobi, there is a fundamental difference between the supernatural and the natural, and therefore they are incomparable. Man has to *jump* from the conditional to the unconditional and from rational mediation to immediate consciousness (faith). In the *Systemfragment* we find Hegel's attitude towards Jacobi to be very ambivalent. He agrees with Jacobi's criticism of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its instrumental conception of reason. But the incommensurability of faith and reason, of the unconditional and the conditional, is at odds with Hegel's idea of infinite life as a living union. More importantly, this incommensurability is at odds with the need of infinite life to express itself in some way or other. Let us take a closer look at this issue.

First, Hegel considers philosophy, in spite of its fundamental limitation, to be of vital importance to religion. Philosophy and religion neither belong to completely different orders, nor are they incommensurable. Philosophy does not coincide completely with the opposite determinations of reflection, but is also the work of reason: »Philosophy has to disclose the finiteness in all finite things and require their integration by means of reason. In particular, it has to recognize the illusions generated by its own infinite and thus to place the true infinite outside its confines«.[27] With this, Hegel indicates that philosophy (as reason) is aware of the limited character of its reflective determinations. Moreover, philosophy reveals these limitations as such. Consequently, it has an implicit and negative consciousness of the true infinite. In this regard, philosophy paves the way for religion: religion begins where philosophy ends. Religion is able to build its infinite unity upon the (philosophical) consciousness of the inherent limitations of reason.

Second, in the *Systemfragment,* Hegel is at pains to articulate the conditional and the oppositional as moments of infinite life, although he recognizes that this relation cannot be clarified conceptually. On this point, he differs fundamentally from Jacobi, for whom the natural can only arise from the supernatural in

a supernatural way, that is, by creation. By stressing the supernatural character of creation, Jacobi widens the gap between the infinite and the finite. Thus, the infinite threatens to become inexpressible. For Hegel, this consequence is unacceptable. This is the basic reason why he considers the finite as a moment of the infinite: life is spirit, »the living unity of the manifold, [or] the enlivening law in a union with the manifold«.[28]

In sum, the most crucial element of Hegel's dependence on Jacobi concerns Jacobi's view that there has to be a strict analogy between the consciousness of the absolute and the absolute itself as well as between the subject and the object of (finite) reason. This basic insight allows Hegel to criticize the instrumental use of reason. But unlike Jacobi, Hegel considers the finite to be an essential moment of infinite living unity. However, if one continues this line of argument, and if one wants to hold to the principle of a strict analogy between the infinite and its consciousness, then reflection, which thinks the finite, has to be a moment of the way in which the absolute is given. This is even more necessary because the infinite can only express itself through reflection. Without reflection, the absolute remains silent, unconscious. For Hegel, this insight implies that reflection, as purely propaedeutical with regard to religion, is insufficient.

Thus, Hegel's determination of the absolute as an infinite living unity rouses a new problem: if the infinite unifies the finite ontologically, reflection (the knowledge of the finite) also has to be unified epistemologically with the non-reflective consciousness of the infinite. This problem causes Hegel to have misgivings about the capacity of religion to elevate man to infinite life, for religion is somehow opposed to reflection. This problem paves the way for a new attitude towards reflection which he develops from the Jena period on. The *Differenzschrift* shows that Hegel's conception of the absolute remains the same as before: the absolute is an infinite living unity, and »the necessary dichotomy is one factor of life«;[29] it is the »appearance of the absolute«.[30] Accordingly, Hegel criticizes the capacity of faith to conceive the absolute. Implicitly referring to Jacobi, Hegel writes: »The immediate certainty of faith, which has been so much talked of as the ultimate and highest consciousness, is nothing but the identity itself, reason, which, however, does not know itself«.[31] Here, Hegel refers to the basic need of the absolute to express itself, thereby becoming conscious of itself.

On the basis of this insight, Hegel starts developing from, the Jena period on, a non-instrumental conception of reason which is capable of expressing the absolute as an original unity of different moments. He calls it a »speculative knowledge« and defines it first as a union of intuition and reflection. Intuition, being the positive side of knowing, represents the moment of immediacy, whereas reflection, being the negative side of knowing, signifies the moment of mediation. »In the transcendental intuition all opposition is superseded«[32]; the absolute identity is immediately given. For Hegel, it is evident that »one cannot philosophize without transcendental intuition«[33], because if one did, philosophy would disperse itself endlessly in absolute finitudes and thus annihilate identity. To this extent, Hegel's determination of intuition runs parallel to Jacobi's conception of the immediacy of faith. But intuition as such, while necessary for philosophy, is not sufficient for philosophy. Intuition is non-conscious and, as Hegel remarks in accordance with Kant, even a form of mystic rapture.[34] Therefore, speculative knowledge must have a negative side, namely reflection. Reflection can be seen as the instrument of all philosophizing, since only reflection is capable of executing the task of philosophy, namely the conscious construction of the absolute which remains unconscious in intuition. In order to carry out this construction, reflection has to posit, that is, determine the absolute. But every determination implies a limitation and calls for other, opposite determinations. In this way, the absolute runs the risk of annihilating the absolute in an endless multiplicity of opposite determinations. In order to avoid this, reflection has to relate to the absolute. In this sense, the absolute is the presupposition of philosophy, or intuition is postulated by reflection (although Hegel considers these terms inappropriate to express this relation).[35] But philosophy is more than an endless repetition of the immediate givenness of the absolute. Philosophy articulates the absolute: »In philosophizing, the absolute is produced by reflection for consciousness«.[36]

Conclusion

With the determination of speculative knowledge as a unity of intuition and reflection, Hegel's critical engagement with Jacobi about the possibility of knowing the absolute comes to a provisional end. I have shown that Hegel basically agrees with Jacobi's criticism of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Both Jacobi and Hegel repudiate an instrumental conception of reason which results in an objectifying representation of the unconditional and absolute. This criticism composes the counterpart of Jacobi's insight that the analogy between consciousness and that of which it is conscious must be as strong as possible. This fundamental insight offers Hegel a criterion of how the absolute can be given to man. At first, Hegel, like Jacobi, uses the words ›faith‹ and ›religion‹ to indicate this consciousness. But gradually Hegel becomes more aware of the fact that his idea of the absolute differs fundamentally from Jacobi's. For Jacobi, there can be no comparison between the unconditional and the conditional, and thus no comparison between the immediacy of faith and the mediation of reason. Hence, the unconditional remains inexpressible. Hegel, on the contrary, conceives the finite as being, in a superseded way, present *in* the infinite. Consequently, reflective knowledge necessarily finds a place within the consciousness of the absolute. To put it even more strongly, the absolute can only be articulated if a distinction is made between consciousness and that of which it is conscious. Articulation is the very essence of the absolute itself. From this perspective, Hegel's transition from a religious to a philosophical approach to the absolute is no surprise. Rather, it is the logical result of his dealing with the consequences of Jacobi's *Spinoza-Letters*.

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NOTES

1 J.W.v. GOETHE, *Dichtung und Wahrheit,* in: *Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, vol. 10, ed. by L. Blumenthal u. W. Loos, Hamburg ³1963, 49.
2 Moreover, Jacobi repeatedly confronted the philosophy of his time with this question. This question was dealt with not only in the pantheism-controversy, but also in the atheism-controversy of 1799 and in the »controversy about the divine things« of 1811/12. Cf. H. TIMM, »Die Bedeutung der Spinozabriefe Jacobis für die Entwicklung der idealistischen Religionsphilosophie«, in: K. HAMMACHER, *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Philosoph und Literat der Goethezeit,* Frankfurt/M. 1971, 38.
3 K. ROSENKRANZ, *G.W.F. Hegels Leben,* Berlin 1844, 40.
4 See H.-J. GAWOLL, »Von der Unmittelbarkeit des Seins zur Vermittlung der Substanz. Hegels ambivalentes Verhältnis zu Jacobi«, in: *Hegel-Studien* 33 (1998), 134, n. 3; P. JONKERS, »Can Philosophy Understand Religion? Tensions in Hegel's Attitude Towards Religion in 1800«, in: *Hegel-Jahrbuch 1997*, ed. by A. Arndt, K. Bal u. H. Ottmann, Berlin 1998, 210-216.
5 F.H. JACOBI, *Werke,* vol. 2, Leipzig 1815, repr. Darmstadt 1976, 232.
6 F.H. JACOBI, *Schriften zum Spinozastreit*, in: *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1, ed. by K. Hammacher u. I.-M. Piske, Hamburg 1998, 249 (henceforth cited as: *GA*).
7 Ibid., 157.
8 Ibid., 258, n., and 260.
9 Ibid., 259.
10 Ibid., 261.
11 Ibid., 166.
12 Ibid., 29.
13 Jacobi criticizes Spinoza for repudiating this transition (*GA* 1, 18) and identifying the finite and the infinite (*GA* 1, 95). He considers this to be the essence of Spinoza's atheism.
14 Ibid., 261.
15 Ibid., 260.
16 Ibid., 115.

17 Ibid., 262.
18 Ibid., 167.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 261.
21 Ibid., 115.
22 Ibid., 168.
23 H.-J. GAWOLL, »Von der Unmittelbarkeit des Seins«, 135.
24 G.W.F. HEGEL, *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften,* ed. by H. Nohl, Tübingen 1907, 347.
25 Ibid., 348.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 347.
29 G.W.F. HEGEL, *Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie*, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, ed. by H. Buchner and O. Pöggeler, Hamburg 1968, 13.
30 Ibid., 16.
31 Ibid., 21.
32 Ibid., 28.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 27 and 63.
35 Ibid., 15 and 29.
36 Ibid., 19.